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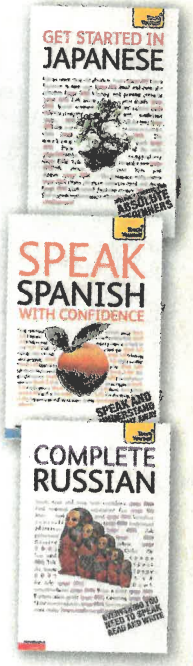

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Languages for the 21st century

Latin American Spanish

¡Ay!

theguardian

7

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With 329 million native speakers, Spanish is the second most popular language in the world, after Mandarin Chinese. There are plenty of reasons to learn Spanish the way they talk it in Latin America – not least since that is where the vast majority of Spanish speakers live. The World Bank has also cited Latin America as the region most likely to bounce back from the current global economic crisis. This booklet will give you of useful vocab and handy phrases, as well as a beginner's guide to Latino gestures. Remember: you can listen to audio versions of all the conversations at **guardian.co.uk/21stclanguages**

Speaking your feelings

To learn the Spanish of the Americas, you need to adapt to the Latino mindset: sometimes raucous, sometimes solemn, but always full of life

Alma Guillermoprieto is a Mexican reporter and writer. She writes regularly for the New Yorker, the New York Review of Books, and National Geographic.

So you are about to apply yourself to learning the basics of a different tongue. Embarrassment and frustration lie ahead; drills, repetition, and the infinite boredom of conjugation await you, and the prospect of mangling words that sit like rocks in your mouth. You'll stumble and make a fool of yourself for a while, and then, should you persevere, a door will open and you'll find yourself in a language that is to the rippling subtleties of English like the broad *altiplano* of the Andes; majestic, sonorous and true.

To gain a language is to gain a world, but to acquire a foreign tongue is also to gain a different way of being, and to change: even as you are repeating mindless exercise phrases like *¿Dónde está la corbata de mi tío?* you will doubtless sit a little taller, thrust your chest out more, lift your chin and inquire about the location of your uncle's tie with a certain grandeur worthy of the language you are speaking. First you imitate the mindset of the language you are struggling to learn, then you

Grafitti on a mural in Buenos Aires

DAN CHUNG/THE GUARDIAN

inhabit it, and finally it inhabits you, and you are more than you once were.

Brought up in the Spanish of raucous marketplaces, solemn devotionals, and soul-shattering song - the Spanish of my native Mexico - I wound up spending part of my childhood in Los Angeles. I remember being offended by the idea that words in English were ungendered. Of course it was *el sol*, a fiery male being, and *la luna*, a beautiful silvery lady! Unsexed words were lifeless things I did not care for, and even the weird names of the

To gain a language is not just to acquire a foreign tongue, but also a different way of being, and to change

letters of the alphabet - not *ah* but *ey*, not *beh* but *bee* - made me feel rebellious. And then the door unlocked and I stepped in, away from the sonorous realms

of Spanish and into the sinuous emotions of English, feeling no longer *emocionada* but "cool". A mountain of books later I ended up a grateful subject of the English language, rejoicing in its effortless swing and jive.

When the Sandinista insurrection in Nicaragua erupted in 1979, I was desperate to put myself on a plane to Managua to see the revolution first hand and ended up reporting on the fight against the dictator Anastasio Somoza for the Guardian. Translating the terrible stories into something that made sense to readers in, say, Manchester - with its general absence of backyards with mango trees, and abundance of regularly scheduled elections in the course of which no one died - taught me some basic lessons on the differences between the two languages. Spanish is a language full of urgent matters, too urgent to leave much room for irony. English, on the other hand, is a language that does not deal well with strong, unambivalent emotions. In English, it is hard to believe in heroes. In Spanish, it is sometimes hard to imagine that a hero could have faults. In terms of wit and culture, the people I wrote for were vastly more sophisticated than the

Spanish is too urgent a language for irony, while English doesn't deal well with strong emotions

Spanish speakers I wrote about, who lived generally far below the poverty line. In terms of life experience and the ability to laugh full-heartedly, the English speakers were babes in arms.

To learn a language is to become a collector. As you make your way through the grammar and the pronunciation you will also pick up words, polish them, turn them over and over until they sit in your hand like smoothly polished stones. Since you are learning Latin American Spanish you will soon discover that, unlike English, which is full of words that can be dissonant, guttural, or yowling, in Spanish every word is beautiful. Take, for example, the word for "stone" in Spanish: *piedra*, a beautiful word I offer you as the first one in your collection. May you add many more, and build a road to a new world with them.

How Latin American Spanish works

Even if you are a complete beginner, you will be surprised at the many similarities that exist between Spanish and English. Spanish, like Italian, Portuguese and French, is derived from Latin, so many Latin-based words in English are similar to Spanish ones: *mayor* (major), *vehículo* (vehicle), *villa* (villa), etc.

You may be wondering whether by learning Latin American Spanish you will be able to communicate with Spanish speakers in Spain. The answer is yes. The differences between Latin American Spanish and that spoken in Spain are something like those variations in British English and American, Australian or Canadian English. They are mainly in the spoken language, particularly in pronunciation and intonation. Differences also exist in vocabulary: some more general, others specific to certain countries. A mobile phone, or cellphone in American English, for example, is *un (teléfono) celular* in Latin America, and *un (teléfono) móvil*, in Spain. So you will be understood.

There are a few minor differences in grammar but you will soon be able to identify them and they will not hinder your communication in any way. By and large, however, the grammar of Spanish is one and the same and there are no differences in spelling such as those you find between British and American English (eg neighbour/neighbor).

Naturally, there are language variations within Latin America itself. Some variations have their roots in the Spanish colonisation of the region; others stem from the influence of indigenous languages and from that of non-Spanish settlers, mainly African and European. This has given rise to distinctive linguistic areas within the region. The Spanish spoken in Mexico, for instance, sounds quite different from that spoken in the River Plate region, in countries like Argentina and Uruguay. This in turn differs from that of the Andean countries or that spoken around the Caribbean. Yet, despite such differences, speakers from all over the Spanish-speaking world can communicate with each other.

VOWELS

Spanish vowels are generally shorter, clearer and more precise than English vowels. Unstressed vowels are not weakened as in English but are given the same value in pronunciation as those which are stressed. For example, in the English word 'comfortable', the vowels which follow the syllable 'com' are weak, while in Spanish every vowel in the word *confortable* has the same quality.

There are only five vowel sounds in Spanish:

a like the 'a' in 'answer', but shorter, eg *gracias*
i like the 'i' in 'marine', eg *inglés*
e like the 'e' in 'end', eg *él*
o like the 'o' in 'God', eg *sol*
u like the 'oo' in 'moon', eg *uno*

Note: When **i** occurs before another vowel, it is pronounced like the 'y' in 'yes'. When **u** occurs before another vowel, it is pronounced like the 'w' in 'wind'. After **q**, **u** is not pronounced at all. **U** is also silent in *gui* and *gue*. **U** is pronounced in *güi* and *güe*, eg *vergüenza*

CONSONANTS

The pronunciation of Spanish consonants is generally similar to that of English consonants. But note the following features:

b+v in initial position and after **n**, like the 'b' in 'bar', with lips closed, eg *Venezuela*. In other positions, more like the 'v' in 'very', with lips slightly apart
c before **a**, **o**, **u**, like the 'c' in 'coast'. Before **e**, **i**, like the 's' in 'sea'
d like the 'd' in 'day', eg *día* Between vowels and after **r**, more like the 'th' in 'those'
g before **a**, **o**, **u**, like the 'g' in 'government'. Before **e**, **i**, like 'h' in 'hand' in Central America and the Caribbean, but more like the Scottish 'ch' in 'loch' in other Latin American countries
j like the 'h' in 'hand' in Central America and the Caribbean, but like 'ch' in 'loch' elsewhere
h is silent, eg *ahora* (a-ora)
ll like the 'y' of 'yawn', but in Argentina and Uruguay more like the 's' in 'pleasure'
ñ like the 'ni' in 'onion'
r between vowels or at the end of a word, like the 'r' in 'very'. In initial position strongly rolled.
y like the 'y' in 'yes', but in Argentina and Uruguay more like the 's' in 'pleasure'
z like the 's' in 'sale', eg *Venezuela*

Note: In Mexico, there are many words derived from indigenous languages which carry an x. The pronunciation of x varies, as can be seen from these examples:

Ixtapa	pronounced as 'ks'
Xochimilco	pronounced as 's'
Oaxaca	pronounced as 'h'
mexica	pronounced as 'sh'

LATIN AMERICAN PRONUNCIATION

As well as several differences in pronunciation between the regions of Latin America, there are a few standard pronunciation features which distinguish Latin American Spanish from the Spanish of Spain. Among these is the *seseo*: the pronunciation of **z** and **c** before an **e** or **i** as 's'. In most parts of Spain you will hear it pronounced like the 'th' in 'think'. The pronunciation of **j** and that of **g** before **e** and **i** is generally much softer in most Latin American countries, not unlike the 'h' in 'house'.

The Mexican accent and pronunciation is one of the most distinctive in Latin America. In general, there is a weakening of vowel sounds, for example in *buen(a)s noch(e)s*, unlike what happens in many other Latin American countries – where consonant sounds are reduced or even omitted altogether in certain positions. The pronunciation of final **s** and **s** before a consonant, as in *buenas noches*, for example, is fully pronounced in Mexico, unlike what happens in the Caribbean or Venezuela, where it tends to be substituted by an aspirated **h**, rendering a pronunciation more like *buena(h) noche(h)*.

Colombians claim they speak the best Spanish in Latin America. Even if you are reluctant to accept adjectives such as good or bad regarding a particular language or dialect, one must admit that the Spanish spoken in some areas of Colombia may seem, to foreign ears at least, clearer and easier to follow than that of some other countries or areas. However, within Colombia there are wide differences between the Spanish spoken in places like Bogotá and Cali, usually associated with 'good, clear Spanish', and that spoken around the Caribbean coast. The latter bears some of the characteristics of Caribbean Spanish, for example the weakening or even disappearance of consonant sounds in certain positions, eg *do(h)*, *tre(h)*, instead of *dos*, *tres*. This weakening or aspiration of **s** before a consonant or in final position and the weakening or disappearance of **d** between vowels (*to(d)o* for *todo*) is also a feature of Chilean pronunciation, and to a large extent of the Argentinian accent too, except in deliberate and more 'careful' speech. A further feature of Chilean accent is the pronunciation of **tr** like the 'tr' in 'country'.

The Argentinian accent is very distinctive, particularly as regards the pronunciation of **y** and **ll**, which are pronounced much like the 'j' in 'John' or the 's' in 'pleasure'.

Buenas noches.
Good evening.

Buenas noches, señora. ¿Qué desea?
Good evening, madam. Can I help you?

Tengo una reservación.
I have a reservation.

¿Cuál es su nombre, por favor?
What is your name, please?

Ana González.
Ana González.

Ah sí, es la habitación número quince.
Ah yes, it's room number 15.

*Mexican speakers

Greetings and goodbyes

buenos días (buen día) *good morning*
buenas tardes *good afternoon/good (early) evening*
buenas noches *good evening/goodnight*
adiós, buenos días *goodbye, have a good morning/day*
encantado/a *pleased to meet you (male/female)*
mucho gusto *how do you do?/pleased to meet you*
señora *Mrs, madam*
señor *Mr, sir*
señorita *Miss*
¿qué desea? *can I help you?*
siéntese *sit down*
por favor *please*
gracias *thank you*
disculpe *I am sorry/excuse me*
¡que le vaya bien! *have a nice day!/take care!*
hasta luego *see you later*
adiós *goodbye*

Introductions

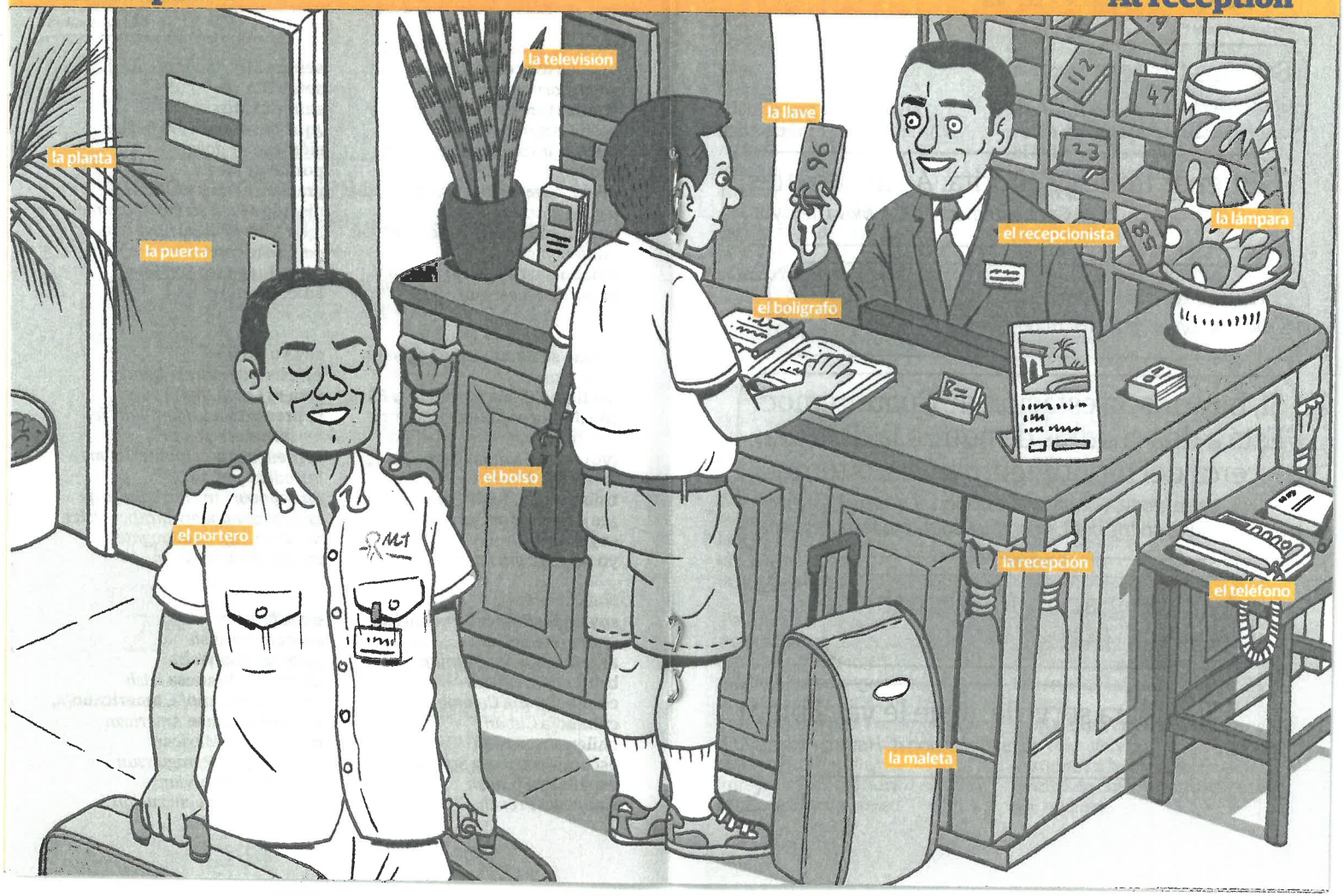
¿cómo se llama usted? *what is your name?*
me llamo Elena *my name is Elena*
¿de dónde es usted? *where are you from?*
(yo) soy de ... *I am from ...*
vivo en ... *I live in ...*
trabajo en ... *I work in ...*
¿es usted ...? *are you?*
soy *I am*
yo no soy *I am not*
soy yo *it's me*
éste es Juan *this is Juan*
ésta es Luisa *this is Luisa*
te presento a ... *(familiar) let me introduce you to ...*
le presento a ... *(polite) let me introduce you to ...*
mi esposo/a *my husband/wife*
mi hermano/a *my brother/sister*
mi hijo/a *my son/daughter*
mis hijos *my children*

Nationalities

soy inglés/inglesa *I'm English (male/female)*
argentino/a *Argentinian*
británico/a *British*
colombiano/a *Colombian*
cubano/a *Cuban*
chileno/a *Chilean*
escocés/escocesa *Scottish*
español/a *Spanish*
francés/a *French*
suizo/a *Swiss*
sueco/a *Swedish*
galés/galesa *Welsh*
irlandés/irlandesa *Irish*
norteamericano/a, americano/a, estadounidense *American*
mexicano/a *Mexican*
paraguayo/a *Paraguayan*
peruano/a *Peruvian*
venezolano/a *Venezuelan*

At reception

At reception



Asking for directions*

Buenas tardes.
Good afternoon.

Buenas tardes, señorita. A sus órdenes.
Good afternoon, Miss. May I help you?

¿Hay una estación de metro por aquí?
Is there an underground station near here?

Sí, hay una, la estación de Cuauhtemoc. Está a dos cuadras de aquí, a la derecha, cerca del monumento a Cuauhtemoc.
Yes, there is one, Cuauhtemoc station. It's two blocks from here, on the right, near the Cuauhtemoc monument.

Muchas gracias. Muy amable.
Many thanks. That's very kind.

Para servirle. ¡Que le vaya bien!
Don't mention it. Have a nice day!

Asking for directions*

*Mexican speakers

Directions

hay ... *there is ... /is there ...?/ there are ... /are there ...?*
¿dónde está la oficina/la habitación? *where is the office/ room?*
¿hay una estación/un banco por aquí? *is there a station/bank nearby?*
está al final del pasillo *it is at the end of the corridor*
está en el quinto piso *it is on the fifth floor*
está a cinco cuadras/minutos de aquí *it is five blocks/minutes from here*
allí *(over) there*
a la izquierda *on the left*
a la derecha *on the right*
cerca de aquí/por aquí *near here*
al lado de ... *next to ...*
entre ... y ... *between ... and ...*
frente a ... *opposite ...*
pasado/a el/la ... *past the ... (male/female)*
antes de ... *before ...*
al final de ... *at the end of ...*
la cuadra *block*
el pasillo *corridor*
el piso *floor*
la ciudad *city*

Landmarks

la oficina *office*
la habitación *room*
el hotel *hotel*
el café *café*
el restaurante *restaurant*
la casa *house*
la iglesia *church*
el museo *museum*
la oficina de turismo *tourist office*
la tienda *shop*
la universidad *university*
la estación *station*
el banco *bank*
la casa de cambio *bureau de change*
el parque *park*
el mercado *market*
el edificio *building*

Polite expressions

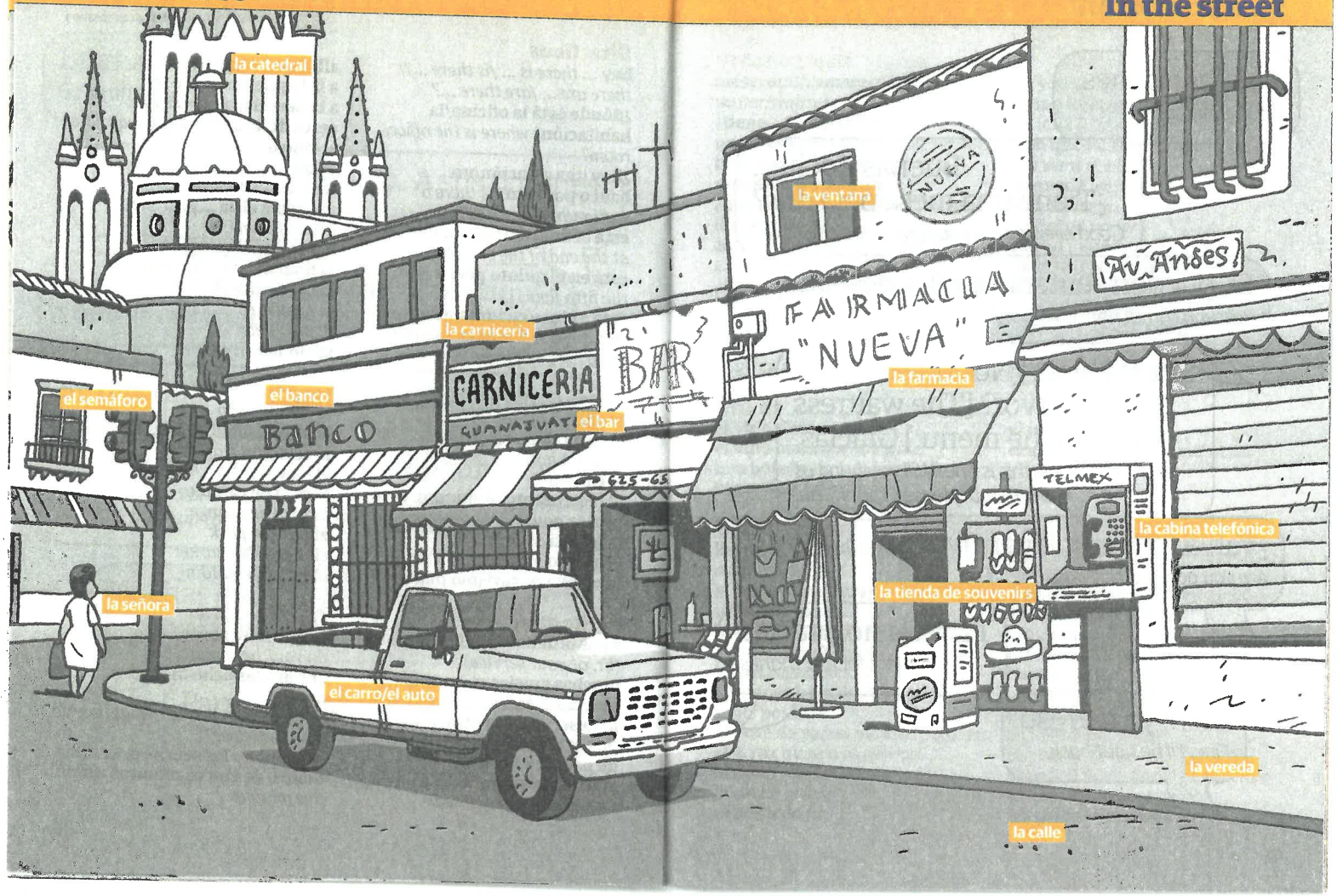
a sus órdenes *may I help you? (lit. at your service)*
muchas gracias *many thanks*
muy amable *that's very kind*
para servirle *don't mention it (lit. at your service)*
de nada *it's nothing*
¡que le vaya bien! *have a nice day!*
está cerrado *it's closed*

Opening times

¿a qué hora abren? *what time do you/they open?*
abren a las ocho *they open at eight*
¿a qué hora cierran? *what time do you/they close?*
cerramos a las seis *we close at six*
dentro de cincos minutos *within five minutes*

In the street

In the street



Buenas noches.
Good evening.

Buenas noches.
¿Tiene una mesa para dos?
Good evening, do you have a table for two?

Sí, pueden sentarse aquí si desean.
Yes, you can sit here if you wish.

Sí, está bien. ¿Nos trae la carta, por favor? [The waitress brings the menu.] Gracias.
Yes, this is fine. Will you bring us the menu, please? Thank you.

¿Van a tomar un aperitivo?
Are you going to have an aperitif?

Para mí no, gracias.
Not for me, thanks.

Bien, ya regreso.
Fine, I'll be right back.

Ordering food

mesero(a)/camarero(a) *waiter/waitress*
¿tiene ...? *do you have ...?*
una mesa para dos *a table for two*
tenemos ... *we have ...*
si desean *if you wish*
¿qué menú prefiere? *which menu do you prefer?*
¿qué va a pedir? *what are you going to order?*
¿qué va a comer? *what are you going to eat?*
¿qué va a tomar? *what are you going to drink?*
¿qué va a comer de postre? *what are you going to have for dessert?*
¿cómo lo/la quiere? *how do you want it?*
¿con qué lo/la quiere? *what do you want it with?*
no queda *we don't have any left*
la carta *menu*
prefiero *I prefer*
quiero *I want*
quisiera *I would like*
para empezar *to start*
¿nos trae ...? *will you bring us ...?*
¿me trae ...? *will you bring me ...?*
la cuenta *bill*
ya regreso *I'll be right back*

Drinks

el vino tinto *red wine*
el vino blanco *white wine*
una botella de ... *a bottle of ...*
la cerveza *beer*
el jugo, el zumo *juice*
el agua mineral *mineral water*
el café *coffee*
el té *tea*

Typical dishes

la crema de espárragos *asparagus soup*
la sopa de verduras *vegetable soup*
la ensalada mixta *mixed salad*
las legumbres mixtas *mixed vegetables*
las papas fritas/salteadas *chips/sauté potatoes*
el puré de papas *mashed potatoes*
el arroz blanco *plain rice*
el pollo *chicken*
la carne *meat*
el pescado *fish*
el pollo asado *roast chicken*
el bistec *steak*
la carne guisada *stewed meat*
la chuleta *chop*
la ternera *veal*
los filetes de pescado *fish fillets*
los camarones *shrimps*
asado/a *roast*
frito/a *fried*
a la plancha *grilled*
el queso *cheese*
el pastel de durazno *peach cake*
el flan *crème caramel*
las galletas *biscuits*

"¡Ojo!"/"¡Cuidado!"
"Watch it!"
How to do it: point your index finger to one eye and hold for a few seconds.

"Te lo juro"
"I swear"/"I promise you"
How to do it: thumb inside a clenched fist, the hand is raised to the mouth and the thumb kissed before throwing the hand forward and flicking the thumb up.

"Más lento"/
"¡No tan rápido!"
"Slow down"/"Not so fast"
How to do it: raise palm of one hand into the air and move up and down in slowed-down patting motion.

"Está delicioso"
"It's delicious"
How to do it: fingers together the hand is placed near the mouth, then jerked forward and the fingers all opened.

Basic grammar

YOU, ME AND EVERYONE ELSE
Singular: yo I, **tú** you, **él** he, **ella** she. **Plural: nosotros** we, **ellos** they (male or group of men and women), **ellas** they (female)
Note: The formal word for "you" is **usted** (singular); it is treated as third-person pronoun. **Ustedes** (plural) adopts the same form as the pronoun "they".

TO BE (ESTAR)
estoy I am, **estás** you are, **está** you are (**usted**), **está** he/she/it is, **estamos** we are, **están** they/you are (**ustedes**)

TO BE (SER)
soy I am, **eres** you are, **es** you are (**usted**), **es** he/she/it is, **somos** we are, **son** they/you are (**ustedes**)
Note: In Spanish there are two verbs for the English verb "to be". There are various rules but the general rule is to use **ser** when you are referring to a characteristic of an object or person that is permanent or fixed, eg "I am English" is **soy inglés/esa**. **Estar** is used when describing a situation or characteristic that can change eg "I am happy" is **estoy contento/a** as one's mood can change.

TO HAVE (TENER)
tengo I have, **tienes** you have, **tiene** you have (**usted**), **tiene** he/she/it has, **tenemos** we have, **tienen** they/you have (**ustedes**)

TO GO (IR)
voy I go, **vas** you go, **va** you go (**usted**), **va** he/she/it goes, **vamos** we go, **van** they/you go (**ustedes**)

TO WANT (QUERER)
quiero I want, **quieres** you want, **quiere** you want (**usted**), **quiere** he/she/it wants, **queremos** we want, **quieren** they/you want (**ustedes**)

WORD GLUE
sí yes
no no
por favor please
gracias thank you
y and (Note: use **e** before words beginning with i/hi) eg **jamón y queso** (ham and cheese) but **jamón e higos** (ham and figs))
o or (Note: use **u** before words beginning with o/ho eg **ojos o labios** (eyes or lips) but **ojos u orejas** (eyes or ears))
con with
sin without
pero but
¿por qué?/porque why?/because
¿qué? what?
¿cuál/cuáles? (pl) which?
¿cuándo? when?
¿dónde? where?
¿cómo? how
más more
menos less